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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

BOSTON

CLASSICAL ART

Classical corridor
Engraved gems

1924

XV

CLASSICAL ART

Classical corridor:
Engraved gems

Department of Classical Art
Gallery Guide no. 15

CLASSICAL ART.

Classical Corridor.

Engraved Gems.

The process of engraving intaglio designs by means of wheel and drill on hard, semi-precious stones was originally derived from Assyria. This art, like others perfected through the centuries of Minoan and Mycenaean civilization, was lost in the confusion of the Dorian "Middle Age," and did not revive until Oriental culture again reached Greece by way of Ionia in the seventh century B. C.

Nearly all the fine, hard stones used by gem-cutters came from the Orient. Sard, chalcedony, agate and jasper were the favorites. Sard ranges in color from golden brown to deep red (specimens of deeper shade are called carnelian), and by reason of its translucency shows the design to better effect than any other stone. Chalcedony varies from pale blue to smoky brown and is generally, but not always, translucent; the most beautiful variety is light blue in color, and is called sapphirine. Agate is a stratified stone with irregular layers of different colors; onyx is the name applied to agate when the layers are regular, and sardonyx when one layer is sard. Jasper, an opaque stone, is found in several colors, - red, black, yellow and green. Rock crystal was also used. Precious stones were rarely engraved in ancient times.

From Egypt is borrowed the scarab form; the convex side of the oval stone is carved to represent the wings and head of a beetle, which rests on a low, flat base, on the under side of which is cut the design. In Greece this form continues through the fifth century B. C. The scaraboid is of similar shape, but without the beetle. The two forms are probably of unrelated origin. The cylinder, often flattened on one side, is a form borrowed from Assyria. Amoung earlier gems occurs the conoid, a bevelled, octagonal cone, with rounded apex and slightly convex base.

Gems were pierced for suspension, and in very early times a single engraved stone was usually strung with uncut stones or beads and worn as an

amulet or ornament. They were used as seals throughout the historical period and were often mounted to turn easily on a swivel set in a loop of gold or silver. At the very beginning of the sixth century B. C., Solon by law forbade Athenian gem-cutters to keep an impression of any signet which they sold. After the end of the fifth century B. C., gems are unpierced and are of shapes convenient for setting in rings and pendants. In Hellenistic and Roman times paste gems, usually reproductions of engraved gems, were common; in beauty of color, luminous quality and hardness of texture ancient glass paste is superior to that made in modern times. Cameo gems, on which the design stands out in relief, were first made in the third century B. C., and reached their highest development during the Augustan period.

Case 7.

Archaic Greek and Etruscan Intaglios.

With each gem is exhibited its impression in plaster.

Top Row.

1. Black jasper scaraboid. Mask of Medusa of archaic type. Greek.

2. Bluish chalcedony conoid. Winged Medusa holding a lion by the tail in each hand. Herakles walks toward her, grasping a lion with one hand and his club with the other. The posture of the figures and the working out of anatomical details are the same as in Greek sculpture at the end of the sixth century B. C. Greek.

3. Smoky chalcedony scaraboid. A lion leaping on the back of a bull. In the field a tortoise and a winged disc. Archaic style. Greek.

4. Sapphirine chalcedony cylinder. A Persian king, accompanied by a charioteer, in a two-horse chariot, shooting an arrow at a leonine griffin, which is already pierced with two arrows. Above, the disc of the sun with eagle's wings and tail. Early fifth century. The gem belongs to the class called Graeco-Persian; that is, made for Persians by Greek artists.

5. Sapphirine chalcedony conoid. A mounted Persian pursuing an ibex which he has just hit with an arrow. Fifth century. Graeco-Persian.

6. Sapphirine chalcedony conoid. A bearded centaur, with the body of a winged lion, draws his bow to drive a lion away from the carcass of a goat. Early fifth century. Graeco-Persian.

7. Rock crystal rectangular, in original silver mount. Bearded Triton, swimming (?) Similar figures appear in Greek sculpture of the archaic period.

Second Row.

1. Opaque chalcedony scaraboid. A stag in flight. Early fifth century. Greek.

2. Rock crystal scaraboid. A winged griffin. Early fifth century. Greek.

3. Chalcedony scaraboid. A crouching lion; above him an eagle flying with a serpent in his talons. Early fifth century. Greek.

4. Sapphirine chalcedony scaraboid. A winged griffin devouring a stag. Fifth century. Greek.

5. Chalcedony scaraboid (cut). An archer: a nude youth kneeling, three-quarter back view, drawing his bow. Probably by Epimenes. About 500 B. C. Greek.

6. Sard scarab (cut). A young warrior bending over to pick up his helmet; his shield on his arm. In the field the letter A, no doubt the first of the owner's name. Early fifth century. Greek.

7. Burnt chalcedony scaraboid. A snarling lion, crouching to spring. Fifth century. Greek.

Third Row.

1. Sard pseudo-scarab, the beetle replaced by a figure of Dionysos in relief. One of the adventures of Herakles. The hero moves to the right; opposite him is a

smaller man with knees and body bent, and right hand raised. Behind Herakles stands Athena holding her spear. Behind the other man, a woman holding a flower in her raised right hand. Second half of sixth century. Greek or Etruscan.

2. Sard scarab. A nude youth led off by two winged females, perhaps death demons. End of sixth century. Etruscan.

3. Sard pseudo-scarab, the beetle replaced by the mask of a Silen. A woman walking rapidly, carrying a branch in one hand, and holding up her garment with the other. Late archaic. Etruscan.

4. Sard scarab in original, gold sepulchral ring. An athlete kneeling, pouring sand on his thigh. Early fifth century. Etruscan.

5. Sard scarab in modern ring. Kapaneus, transfixed with the thunderbolt of Zeus, sinks on one knee. He has dropped his sword, but still holds his shield. Kapaneus was one of the Argive chiefs who accompanied Polyneikes in the expedition of the Seven Against Thebes. He boasted that even the lightning of Zeus should not prevent him from burning the city. Zeus heard the challenge, and with a bolt from heaven hurled Kapaneus from a lofty scaling ladder. Fifth century. Etruscan.

6. Sard scarab. A dead youth borne by two winged figures, one female and one male. Early fifth century. Etruscan.

7. Sard scarab. Ajax dead. A winged female spreads a cloth over his body. Early fifth century. Etruscan.

Fourth Row.

1. Sard scarab. Jason, swallowed by the dragon, or perhaps issuing from its mouth. Early fifth century. Etruscan.

2. Sard scarab. Herakles, dressed in the skin of the Nemean lion, brandishing his club and holding his bow and arrows. Facing him a small, bearded man - a suppliant with hands outstretched. Early fifth century. Greek.

3. Chalcedony scarab. A lion devouring a mule. Early fifth century. Greek.

4. Sard scarab. Herakles lying on a raft, which is supported by amphorae half-submerged. With his right hand he holds the end of the sail, as well as his bow and arrows; in his left hand his club, as if he were steering with it. Early fifth century. Etruscan.

5. Striped agate scarab. Two warriors supporting a wounded comrade. Fifth century. Etruscan.

6. Sard scarab in modern ring. Hermes kneeling, wearing petasos (round hat with brim) and cloak; in one hand he carries his herald's staff (kerykeion, caduceus), in the other a wreath. Fifth century. Etruscan.

7. Sard scarab. Herakles struggling with the Nemean lion. Fifth century. Etruscan.

Case 8.

Greek and Italiote Intaglios of the Fifth Century and later.

With each gem is exhibited its impression in plaster.

Top Row.

1. Rock crystal scaraboid. A galloping bull, stung on the rump by a gadfly. Fifth century.

2. Rock crystal scarab. A dove flying. Fifth century.

3. Sard scaraboid. A dog scratching his head. Fifth century.

4. Yellow jasper mottled with chalcedony, scaraboid. A pantheress crouching for an upward spring. Late fifth or early fourth century.

5. Agate scaraboid. A bull-calf. His head is lowered and his tail a little raised

as if he were slightly aggressive. Late fifth century.

6. Chalcedony scaraboid. A cow browsing from a small tree. Fifth century.

7. Red jasper scaraboid. Danaë stands beside her bed, receiving in the folds of her garment the golden shower from Zeus. Fifth century.

Second Row.

1. Rock crystal scaraboid. A fallow deer browsing; he is about to nibble one of the plants which grow round him. Late fifth century.

2. Sard scaraboid, in modern ring. A deer browsing. Late fifth century.

3. Sard scaraboid (cut). A fallow deer browsing. Late fifth century.

4. Chalcedony scaraboid. A heron standing on one leg. Herons were domestic pets in Greek households, cherished by the engraver's patrons, and admired and studied by the engraver. The present example, though without signature, is probably to be assigned to Dexamenos of Chios on account of its resemblance to two stones with representations of herons in Petrograd, which are signed by him. Dexamenos is not only the finest of the few Greek engravers of gems known by name; his works are preëminent among the extant intaglios of the fifth century.

5. Agate cylinder, flattened on one side. A heron standing on one leg. Of less delicate workmanship than No. 4, but related in style to Dexamenos.

6. Chalcedony scaraboid (cut). A goat walking. Later fifth century.

7. Agate scaraboid. A goat standing. In the field, Π , no doubt the initial letter of the owner's name. Late fifth century.

Third Row.

1. Gold ring. A Nereid riding a hippocamp (sea-horse); a dolphin below. Late fifth

century.

2. Silver ring. A Nereid with a shield, riding a sea-horse. (Possibly Thetis carrying the shield of Achilles). Later fifth century.

3. Gold ring. A lion devouring a dolphin. Later fifth century.

4. Gold ring. Niké (Victory) flying with a wreath. Fifth century.

5. Gold ring. A girl playing knuckle-bones. Later fifth century.

6. Gold ring. A cat and a cock vis-à-vis. Later fifth century.

7. Gold ring. A rider (an Amazon?) striking with a lance at a spotted fallow deer. The deer is also attacked by a hound; in front of the horse's head, a flying bird of prey. End of the fifth century.

Fourth Row.

1. Sard, slightly convex. Theseus capturing the sow of Krommyon. Fourth century.

2. Bluish chalcedony, quasi-rectangular. A sea-pantheress attacking a polypus. Hellenistic period.

3. Sard, oblong. A young warrior, wounded, sinking on one knee. He is fully armed with shield, crested helmet, cuirass, greaves and short sword. On the back of the cuirass a winged griffin. Hellenistic period. Italiote.

4. Sard, oval, in modern ring. A battle-scene with seven figures; probably Ajax and Menelaos defending the body of Patroklos from the Trojans. Hellenistic. Italiote.

5. Chalcedony, oval. Portrait of a man, bearded and wearing a crown of laurel. The face resembles king Perseus of Macedon (178-168 B.C.). Hellenistic. Greek.

6. Hyacinth, oval. Portrait of a Hellenistic ruler, perhaps Demetrios III of Syria (95-88 B.C.)

7. Garnet, convex, in original heavy gold ring. Inside the hoop, the inscription XAIPE, "Hail". Aphrodite arming. She stoops and passes her left arm through the grip of the shield, holding the rim with her right hand. The spear rests against her shoulder. Her legs are draped. Signed by the artist, Gelon. Hellenistic period. Found in a tomb at Eretria with the jewelry and terra-cottas shown in Case 1. in the Fourth Century Room.

Case 9.

Intaglios, chiefly of the Graeco-Roman Period.

With each gem is exhibited its impression in plaster.

Top Row.

1. Sard, oval. Hermes tuning a lyre. The softly rounded nude form is consciously and somewhat theatrically posed to produce a graceful effect.

2. Sard, circular. Portrait of an elderly man.

3. Sard, fragmentary. A Nereid on a sea-horse.

4. Yellow glass paste. A mounted warrior hurling his spear at a fallen opponent.

5. Sard, nearly circular. Part of the design has been broken off. A Nereid riding on the back of a Triton. In the waves below them a baby Eros and a dolphin are playing. The inscription ΥΛΛΟΥ (the name of the artist, Hyllus) is perhaps modern. Hellenistic period.

6. Blue glass paste, oval. Ares thrusting a spear into the breast of a fallen giant, whose legs end in serpents.

7. Sard, oval. Omphale with the lion's skin and club of Herakles.

Second Row.

1. Purple glass paste, iridescent. Poseidon with a trident, riding a winged sea-horse.

2. Sard, oval. A bald, bearded Silen, dressed in a fur shirt, sits on the ground grasping a full wine-skin. Italiote. Third century B.C.

3. Sard, oval. A female figure walking; behind her a tree; before her a small Cupid.

4. Carnelian, rectangular, engraved on all four sides. (a) Young Herakles carrying a bull. (b) Lykurgos, with a double-axe, destroying the vine. As a punishment for opposing the advance of Dionysos into Greece, the Thracian king Lykurgos was made mad by the god. According to one version of the story, Lykurgos, attacking Dionysos (as he thought) in the guise of a vine, killed his own wife and child. (c) A young warrior carrying a trophy of arms on his shoulder and a spear in his hand. (d) A bearded warrior, with helmet and shield, resting on his spear. Roman. Republican Period.

5. Garnet, convex oval. The youthful Dionysos, seated, holding a thyrsos, and pouring wine for a panther from a jug; a young satyr stands beside him. Hellenistic.

6. Sard, oval. Head of a snarling leopard. Inscribed: CN. VITALIS (the owner's name)

7. Sard, oval. An archaic Apollo; he holds bow and arrows in one hand and in the other the fore-foot of a fawn which stands on its hind-legs in front of him. Perhaps a reproduction of the archaic bronze statue of Apollo Philesios by Kanachos at Miletus.

Third Row.

1. Sard, nearly circular. A girl's head.

2. Red jasper, oval. Portrait bust of a child. Roman.

3. Sard, oval. Bust of Sabina, wife of the emperor Hadrian, about 100 A.D.

4. Sard, oval. Bust of Sabina (?)

5. Sard, oval. Portrait of an elderly Roman.

6. Sard, oval. Portrait of a middle-aged Roman. Inscribed: GNTS.

7. Bezel of a silver ring. Portrait of a Roman.

Fourth Row.

1. Sard, in original, massive gold ring. Portrait of an elderly Roman.

2. Plasma (root of emerald), oval. Portrait of Julia, daughter of the emperor Titus, who is represented on No. 3.

3. Plasma, oval. Portrait of the Roman emperor, Titus (41-81 A.D.)

4. Amethyst, oval. Portrait of Lucius Verus, co-ruler with Marcus Aurelius (161-169 A.D.)

5. Sapphire, oval. Bust of a Roman emperor of the fourth century A.D., perhaps one of the sons of Constantine the Great.

6. Garnet, pear-shaped. Portrait of the Sassanid king of Persia, Hormisdas II (273-309 A.D.). Inscription in Pehlevi.

7. Sard, convex oval. Portrait of a Sassanid king of the third century A.D. The inscription, in Pehlevi, has been translated: "Sahôê the Chief, son of Churra, Overseer or High Priest of the Body Bearers".

Case 10.

Cameos

Cameo gems, on which the design stands out in relief, usually on stones composed of layers of different colors, were first made in the third century B.C., and reached their highest development in the Augustan Period. They were not adapted for use as signets, but were personal ornaments or decorations for cups, caskets and other objects. The gem-cutters were generally Greeks working for Roman patrons.

Top Row.

1. Sardonyx: three layers, light brown, white

and dark brown. Profile portrait of a woman with a laurel wreath in her hair; perhaps Antonia (born 36 B.C.), daughter of Marc Antony and Octavia, and wife of Nero Drusus.

2. Sard. Tiberius, Emperor from 14 to 37 A.D.

3. Onyx: ivory white on bluish white. From the Appian way, near Rome. Mask of Medusa; wings in her hair and snakes knotted beneath her chin. The face, framed in luxuriant locks of hair, is of the beautiful and pathetic type.

4. Onyx: brown on white. Septimius Severas, Emperor 193-211 A.D.

5. Sardonyx: white on brown. Laurel-crowned busts, in high relief, of Claudius, wearing the veil of the Pontifex Maximus, and of Messalina. Claudius, son of Nero Drusus and Antonia, was born in 10 B.C.; he married Messalina about 41 A.D., the year in which he became Emperor.

Second Row.

1. Sardonyx: three layers, brown, bluish white, and brown. Hermes (Mercury), wearing cloak and hat, carries his herald's staff in one hand and a purse in the other. Roman merchants honored Mercury as their special patron, and in Roman art the god is often represented with a purse.

2. Sardonyx: the background is lost; the upper layer is watered grey. Head of a Ptolemaic queen, wearing the cap of vulture's feathers and the diadem. Egyptianizing style. Hellenistic.

3. Green turquoise. Laureate busts of Livia and her son Tiberius. In 38 B.C., eleven years before his accession to the throne, Octavius (Augustus) married Livia as his second wife. At his death, Livia's son by her former marriage became emperor. The workmanship and the material of the gem are equally remarkable.

4. Glass paste: white on dark brown. A youth (Kastor or Polydenkes)lifting a maiden (one of the daughters of Leukippos) into a chariot.

Third Row.

1. Sardonyx: ivory white on brown. Aurora (Eos, goddess of the Dawn) in a chariot, giving free rein to her galloping horses. The design is admirably composed, and is executed in bold relief. The nearer wheel of the chariot was apparently cut separately and attached to the axle by a small silver pin. No. 3 in this row is similar in design.

2. Sardonyx: pale coffee brown on cloudy black. Graeco-Roman. Signed by the artist, Tryphon:

The mystic marriage of Eros (Cupid) and Psyche. The betrothed pair are veiled and are guided by means of a knotted fillet in the hand of a torch-bearer toward a couch at the right, which an attendant is preparing. Behind them another attendant with curling wings holds a basket of fruit above their heads. Eros is a charming figure of a child. He clasps a dove to his breast and moves forward with hesitation, because he cannot see his steps on account of the veil over his face. Psyche walks close beside him; she has the wings of a butterfly and wears a long transparent robe.

The group is so naturally composed and so animated that one almost forgets the subtlety of the technique which has given the idea complete and delicate expression under the difficult conditions presented by the material and size of the gem. The subject chosen by the artist is adapted with wonderful instinct to the colors of the stone; lit by a flickering torch the procession advances through the night, and the warm flesh tones of the childish figures naked/ are deepened in shadow.

This was the most celebrated gem in the collection made by the third Duke of Marlborough during the second half of the eighteenth century, and had been formerly in the collection of the Earl of Arundel in the time of Charles I. It was first published in the seventeenth century by Spon, who stated that it had once belonged to Pirro Ligorio. If this statement is correct, the modern history of the gem may be traced back well into the sixteenth century, as Ligorio lived until 1580.

3. Jasper onyx: white on black. Aurora driving a two-horse chariot. Similar to No. 1, but less fine.

Fourth Row.

1. Sardonyx: white on pale brown. A satyr and a boy.

2. Yellow glass paste, iridescent. Portrait of a youthful Ptolemy, wearing the double crown of Egypt. Perhaps Ptolemy IV, Philopator (221-204 B.C.), whose portrait in marble is shown in the Late Greek Room.

3. Sardonyx: milky white on dark brown. Orestes and Pylades in Tauri. This story forms the subject of the tragedy of Euripides, Iphigeneia among the Taurians. Orestes had been bidden by an oracle to carry off the image of Artemis from the temple in Tauri. He there finds his sister Iphigeneia, who had been sacrificed at Aulis, but saved from death by Artemis, miraculously transported to Tauri and made priestess of the temple. Orestes is seated in a dejected pose before the door of the temple in which a guard is standing. His comrade, Pylades, stands looking down at him, his hand resting on a pillar.

4. Sardonyx: white on dark brown. A bearded Centaur, wearing a lion's skin, carries a goat on his left shoulder; he is spilling wine from an inverted kantharos in his right hand.

5. Onyx: white on greyish blue. Bacchic scene. With one hand and by means of a cord over his shoulder, a young Satyr is pulling along some object - perhaps the car of Bacchus (Dionysos) - which has been broken away; an old Satyr dressed in a shaggy goat's skin is leaping to the sound of cymbals played by a dancing Maenad.